DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 259 434 EA 017 795

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TITLE Interest Group Activities in Selected School Districts. Report of a Preliminary Survey.
PUB DATE Sep 83
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; *Organizations (Groups); *Political Influences; Questionnaires; *Research Methodology; *School Districts
IDENTIFIERS *Interest Groups

ABSTRACT

The first phase of an investigation of interest groups seeking to influence decisions about education provided data about such groups' identities, objectives, tactics, and effectiveness and more importantly, provided information about the data-gathering process that will improve efforts to expand the study of such groups. Nineteen of 30 superintendents from selected school districts who had previously participated in an informal program sponsored by the department of Administration at the University of Toledo (Ohio) responded to open-ended questionnaires. The responses revealed that the questions asked were probably given individual interpretations by the respondents. Classification of the results was thus impossible, though the range of results received enabled the investigators to develop preliminary classification schemes to use in conjunction with a more precisely formulated questionnaire that could draw a full range of responses from every respondent. The developed classification of groups by objectives divides interest groups into those of local origin and those affiliated with larger organizations, and into those making demands of the educational system and those providing support for the system. The classification by tactics matches the tactics used by the group with the group's intended targets. Groups are classified by effectiveness in terms of the extent to which they meet their own objectives. (PGD)

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Interest Group Activities In Selected School Districts

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Report of a Preliminary Survey

September 1983

Richard Saxe

ED259434

Introduction

This is the report of the first phase of an investigation of interest groups seeking to influence decisions about education. This preliminary survey was undertaken to help improve data-gathering procedures before designing an instrument to survey a much larger population. Our interest in the results is more in the way the process is working rather than in the substance of the replies. Nevertheless, it is likely that participants in the preliminary survey will be interested in the substance as well as the process. Hence, this report, which is a general summary of the results as well as our first attempts to improve the process of collecting the information.

Procedure

An open-ended questionnaire was designed asking superintendents of the selected districts to:

1. Identify interest groups active in their districts;
2. State the groups' objectives,
3. Describe the tactics of the groups, and
4. Estimate the effectiveness of the groups.

The questionnaire, a cover letter, and a return mailer were sent to superintendents of thirty districts of varied size, function, and location. All superintendents are members of an informal group which meets occasionally with faculty of the Department of Administration to discuss matters of mutual interest. The group is much more likely to respond to a somewhat burdensome request to supply responses to open-ended probes than a group of comparable size selected in a random fashion. The disadvantage from a research perspective is their diversity in many variables. Because our concern at this stage is with the process, this is no disadvantage; more likely an advantage.

EA 017 795

Response

At this time 19 of 30 (63 percent) superintendents have responded. Communication from some non-respondents assures us that their replies are forthcoming but for present purposes we can proceed without waiting for additional data.

Interest Groups Identified

The number of interest groups identified per district ranged from zero to twelve. The median number identified for the nineteen respondents was only four. Table 1 is a list of the groups identified. The group most commonly cited (by thirteen superintendents) was Mothers' Clubs/PTA's/PTO's. This is as expected and it is a problem for the next phase to prepare directions in such a manner that all districts having such groups will identify them. We assume that all districts have such groups or their equivalents by another name. This problem may be solved by providing a list of typical organizations to be checked off instead of the open-ended probe used in this survey. The same comment can be made about Teachers' Federations.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Classification of Interest Groups

We failed to find an appropriate classification system to organize the data in Table 1. Steele and his colleagues and Davies and Zerchykov had both addressed this issue in the same source (1981). The Davies categories designed to accomodate parent interest groups were not discrete and included many categories that our data suggest do not exist at present. Steele and his

TABLE 1

INTEREST GROUPS IN SELECTED DISTRICTS

Group	Times Cited	Classification Cell
Mothers' Clubs/PTA/s/PTO's	13	9C, 4D
Teacher's Federations	8	B
Athletic Boosters	7	B
Band/Music Boosters	7	B
Ohio Association of Public School Employees	4	B
Special Education Advocate Groups	4	B
Program Advisory Committees	3	C
None	3	NA
Gifted Education Advocate Groups	2	B
Non-Public School Parents	2	A
Parents for a Specific Concern (e.g. anti-smoking)	2	A
NAACP	2	B
Parent-Taxpayer Committee	1	A
Farm Bureau	1	B
La Rasa Unida	1	B
Political Parties	1	B
Chamber of Commerce	1	B
Pro-Tuition Tax Credits Group	1	B
Neighborhood Associations	1	A
Religious Groups	1	A
American Field Service	1	B

colleagues placed groups according to relative permanence, origin, and organizational structure (i.e. formal vs informal). These organizing elements may prove useful later on, but now they do not appear to be very helpful. What is needed is some system that will convey to administrators something about the political stance of the group -- put bluntly is it likely to actively demand something from the district more than is presently provided, does it seek a change, and is it part of a larger group that may send on issues from national or state levels whether or not they are yet of local district concern. We thought of also adding categories of multi vs single issue but thought it not necessary to add that dimension at this time.

Our first simple attempt at a classification system has, then, only four cells. We ask whether the prevailing stance of the group is one of making demands (Demand) or providing support (Supports). We use these in Easton's sense (1965) with supports referring to the willingness of the group to acknowledge the legitimacy of the district and abide by its lawful actions. Demands refers to the request for change of some kind. Both demands and supports are stimulated by events in the larger society, hence our other classification -- Local Only vs Affiliated. Affiliated we shall take to mean an organization at a local level which is part of an association of similar groups with a state or even national office and agenda.

It seems to us that this is a more meaningful classification scheme and we have placed the groups identified in Table 1 in the appropriate cells. Readers who want to check the accuracy of our placements will find the data in Table 1 under the heading "Classification." The results of this exercise are shown in Figure 1 below. It seems that the presentation of data in this manner reveals more of the dynamics of interest groups than the other systems described

FIGURE 1

CLASSIFICATION OF 63 INTEREST GROUPS

PREDOMINANT MODE	AFFILIATION		
	Local	Affiliated	TO
Demand	A 19	B 28	47
Support	C 12	D 4	16
TO	31	32	63

Tactics

Ultimately it will be necessary to assign tactics to the corresponding type of interest group. For now, we shall place the entries of the respondents in categories and attempt to devise a classification system for tactics. We first listed all of the specific tactics noted by respondents. These were then grouped by identity or similarity. The results of this treatment are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2

TACTICS OF EDUCATION INTEREST GROUPS

Tactic	Times Cited
Use various conventional communication means and channels to persuade and advocate (e.g., phone, letter, newspaper).	12
Raise funds to help schools accomplish the general purposes of the group.	9
Petition/Request benefit from the Board of Education	8
Confrontation/Threat/Group pressure applied to the Board and/or Administration	6
Grievance/Negotiation	5
Assist educators by providing services	3

Classification of Tactics

It is not possible to test an organizational scheme to classify tactics, but a description of the planned approach should suffice to show the problems to be dealt with as we construct the data-gathering instrument. We propose to use a two-dimensional model. One dimension, the one for which we did not secure data in this preliminary survey, is the most likely target of the tactic. This dimension would need to include the board, administrators, the public, and other potential recipients of the tactics noted. The other dimension would be an array of the more likely tactics. An idea of how this would be done can be seen in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2

TACTICS OF INTEREST GROUPS BY TARGETS

(Unfinished, Preliminary Design)

Target	Tactic						
	Confrontation	Newspapers	Funds	Service	Conventional Media	Negotiations	Other
Board							
Superintendent							
Other Administrator							
Public							
Teachers							
Others (Name)							
Others							

Effectiveness

Responses to this section of the survey were most often in terms of numbers on a scale of effectiveness or written descriptors of effectiveness. Several respondents rated in terms of helpfulness and cooperativeness to the district not necessarily in terms of the purposes of the interest group. Probably we should define effectiveness as how successful the group is in accomplishing its own agenda. The responses should be invited by written descriptors on a continuum which can be converted to numerical ratings for analysis.

Comments

As we noted at the onset, no analysis of this group of districts should be attempted because of the extreme variability in important elements. It does seem that the over-all situation is much more tranquil than one would expect. Superintendents reporting no interest groups (and there were three) may be envied by some of us, but it must be remembered that interest groups are not all hostile. Witness the surprising finding that the second most common tactic was raising funds to contribute to schools! The temptations to treat these data as drawn from the same population must be resisted. It is fair, however, to deduce appropriate knowledge and skills required of administrators serving in the districts surveyed.

Final Note

The survey has accomplished all of our objectives. We can now approach the task of designing a superior data-gathering instrument with confidence thanks to this experience. If readers are stimulated to think of solutions to problems in that task, we trust they will share them. Your reactions are always helpful. Your assistance with this task is sincerely appreciated.

THANK YOU !

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